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ABSTRACT

The establishment of a religious studies department at San Bernardino Valley College (California) is proposed. The proposal, if approved, would make this college the first California community college to have a department of religion. In this report the following areas are considered: (1) the question of the legality of teaching religion in public institutions of higher education; (2) the role and responsibility of higher education in the teaching of religion; (3) the present practices of the state colleges and universities with regard to the teaching of religion; and (4) the attitudes and responses of students with regard to studying religion. The author notes that a great deal of concern and interest is shown by students, as evidenced by their response to "World Religions" a course which is presently being cffered by the philosophy department. (Author/BB)

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PROPOSAL FOR THE CREATION OF A RELIGIOUS STUDIES DEPARTMENT AT SAN BERNARDINO VALLEY COLLEGE

This is a proposal to establish a Religious Studies Department at San Bernardino Valley College. If such a department is initiated, Valley College would become the first California community college to have such a department. Departments of religion, however, are not new in California public higher education, as both the state college and university systems have such departments. There are at least four areas of consideration that are germane to an exploration of this proposal:

1. the legality of teaching religion in public higher education
2. the role and responsibility of higher education in the teaching of religion
3. the present practices of the state colleges and universities in respect to the teaching of religion
4. the attitudes and responses of students respecting religion.

The Question of Legality

Neither the Constitution of the United States nor the Constitution of the State of California excludes the teaching of religion in the public schools, and the most recent court rulings involving religion indicate that the teaching of the history of religions and the study of comparative religions is legal. The federal limitations on religion in higher education revolve around the first amendment to the Constitution with its provisions that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In the case of Everson v. Board of Education (1947), the Supreme

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Court upheld the providing of public monies for busing children attending private and parochial schools. The decision argued that the separation of church and state does not necessitate striking down legislation which is beneficial to child welfare and only incidentally serves to aid religion. The Court stated that the "establishment of religion" clause means, "Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another."

In cases involving released time to primary school children for denominational religious education, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of such a practice when such released time did not entail the use of public classrooms or funds for advancing sectarian religious training. Justice Douglas commented in the Zorach v. Clauson (1952) case:

> Government may not finance religious groups nor undertake religious instruction nor blend secular and sectarian education nor use secular institutions to force one or some religion on any person. But we find no constitutional requirement which makes it necessary for government to be hostile to religion and to throw its weight against efforts to widen the effective scope of the religious influence.

In the famous New York Regent's prayer case, Engel v. Vitale (1962), the high court held that a prayer, composed by a governmental agency (the Regents) and at the direction of a local school board read daily in each class, to be a violation of the "establishment of religion" clause. After a study of the implications of the Engel case, the released time cases, and the busing case on the teaching of religion in higher education, the following conclusions have been reached. Public institutions must exercise no favoritism among sects or

between religion and non-religion. Public education cannot provide its classrooms, instructional resources, or monies for the promotion of religious worship or devotion. However, the separation of church and state and the no-establishment clause does not, according to Justice Brennan, preclude "teaching about the Holy Scriptures or about the differences between religious sects . . . it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion."

The Constitution of California naturally reinforces the federal free-exercise and no-establishment clauses. It also pointedly prohibits uses of public monies to aid religious sects, churches, creeds or to directly support parochial schools (Article IV, sec. 30). It also requires that higher education be kept free of sectarian influence. The study of religion or theology in California schools of higher education is not prohibited. Repeatedly governmental agencies have indicated that the Bible may be discussed in appropriate classes and that there is no legal objection to the objective and non-advocatory review of religious thought in an historical or academic manner. Two local public high schools, for example, provide a course in the Bible. The creation of a department of Religious Studies at Valley College should be enhanced by recent California legislation which clearly associates community campuses with the rest of higher education rather than treating community colleges as secondary schools. Such recognition provides more latitude in junior colleges for the teaching of religion courses and the establishing of religion

departments. Departments of religion or religious studies are obviously legal in the state of California as departments so entitled are operating at the University of California at Riverside, The University of California at Santa Barbara, and San Fernando Valley State College. Several such departments are in the planning stage including our neighbor, California Poly at Pomona. In the Article, "Religion, Theology and Public Higher Education," published in the California Law Review, the authors admirably sum up the legal and educational guides in respect to teaching religion:

> "To offer theological or other courses in religion which are voluntary, conducted on a high level, intellectually objective, given to students at college age in absence of circumstances which would render such courses coercive on the religious beliefs of students or indicate an 'official' approval or disapproval of a particular viewpoint is constitutionally and legally unobjectionable."

The Importance of Religious Studies

Higher education has a serious obligation and responsibility for the teaching of religion. In the final analysis, the legitimacy of the study of religion is not simply a legal or public relations matter but an educational and academic one. Higher education should provide ample opportunity for the study of religion because it has been and still is a major factor influencing human culture. A knowledge of religion is essential to a broad and liberal education. Justice Clark put the study of religion in its proper educational context when he wrote:

> "It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relation to the advancement of civilization."

Viewed in this light, a college cannot ignore religion if it is to provide students with the materials for an understanding of culture. Biblical imagery is so widespread in the history of western arts and letters that the present widespread "biblical illiteracy" is a serious handicap to understanding. Further, how can a student expect to have any in-depth understanding of European history without study of the Reformation or of American history without studying its religious phenomena?

Colleges must not only take steps to provide courses in religion, but they must expect such courses to be taught objectively and with sufficient academic rigor. Religion must be an intellectual discipline with the same demands of research and analysis which typify academic studies. In the presentation of such courses, the college should seek qualified instructors and provide a faculty which in its composition represents the religious pluralism which so characterizes our culture.

Present Statewide Precedents

In general, the state colleges and universities provide an undergraduate curriculum in religion with majors offered at many campuses. Presently, three campuses have fully established departments of religion (UCSB, UCR, SFVSC). A fourth college, California State College at Fullerton, has a Religious Studies Center which sponsors courses in religion and functions out of their Interdisciplinary Center. Several other campuses are exploring the route they should travel in the teaching of religion and the establishment of departments. The University of California campuses at Berkeley and Los Angeles have long offered

full majors in religion to their students, though their religion courses are presented through a variety of departments.

Since our students can and do readily transfer to state colleges and universities which offer such majors or courses for study, then it would appear appropriate that San Bernardino Valley College offer its students a chance to begin such a study. There should be no problems in the transferring of such courses since the courses to be proposed here are given at the lower division level throughout the state. Of course, our primary responsibility will not be to majors or minors in religion, but to the great number of students who seek to take a course or two in religion as part of their general education in order to achieve broader understanding, and not in order to specialize.

The Interest of Students in Religion

Finally, college students are tremendously interested in religion. Their concerns are more and more theological and moral. The Catholic lay theologian, Michael Novak, puts it, "They are expressing themselves in religions terms," and Stanford curriculum expert, Dr. Mayhew, argues that today's college student is primarily interested in theological and religious dialogue revolving around the meaning of life. While this widespread interest in studying religion is usually accompanied by some skepticism or uneasiness with institutionalized religion, the students' concern is no less meaningful. The interest in religion at Valley College has been well demonstrated by the popularity of its World Religions course. For instance, last spring three sections of the course

were offered and each enrolled a minimum of 40 students.

In view of student interest, the growth and presence of religious studies at transfer institutions, its legality, and above all, the recognition that a liberal education involves some exposure to the study of religion, I hope that San Bernardino Valley College will establish a Religious Studies department.

The Religious Studies department initially would offer four courses. Two of the courses would be new: "Introduction to Religious Studies" and "Religion in America." A third course, "World Religions," would be transferred from the philosophy department to the Religious Studies Department. The fourth course, "Literature and Religion of the Bible," would be a revival of a course offered in the evening division years ago under the leadership of Mrs. Nora Parker Coy. The courses in Biblical Literature and Religion in America could be offered under the English and History departments as well (example: Literature and Religion of the Bible could be offered as Religious Studies 25 and English 25). The staffing of duo-department courses could be shared by the departments, either on an alternate basis or by team teaching, thereby providing the college with more chances for ecumenicity and pluralism in staffing.

Presently such a department could function in either the Humanities or Social Science division: pending any future restructuring of such divisions. It, of course, should ultimately be at home in the Humanities Division. For administrative purposes Religious Studies could be combined with Philosophy to form a Philosophy and Religious Studies Department. In conjunction with the

establishment of such studies, I would like to apply to the Danforth Foundation for a grant to underwrite half of the department's instructional costs, projected over the next three years. In any case, costs to the college would be minimal, as it only involves small portions of instructional time. Presently the World Religions class entails from 1/5 to 2/5 teaching load a semester. Outlines and course descriptions follow.

Short Bibliography:

Claire Cox. The Fourth R: What Can Be Taught About Religion in the Public Schools. Miss Cox argues that teaching the history of religion and the study of world religions is legal and appropriate. She also argues that recent Supreme Court rulings should help rather than curtail the meaningful place of religion in the classroom.

David W. Louisell and John H. Jackson. "Religion, Theology, and Public Higher Education," California Law Review (Dec., 1962). The authors have contributed an outstanding essay on the legality of religion in higher education. It includes a list of courses offered in religion in colleges and universities in California.

Robert Michaelsen. The Study of Religion in American Universities. This study, which was completed in 1965, includes the University of California at Santa Barbara and several non-California state universities. It is a valuable study of the various approaches to the teaching of religion in public institutions.

L. Swidler. "Theology In the State University," Christian Century, May 11, 1966. The article argues for the appropriateness of religion in higher education and calls for it to be taught with intellectual and academic respectability.

California Junior Colleges Association has published two helpful aids on the subject: "Guidebook for California Junior Colleges On Courses Pertaining to Religion" and "Religion and Western Values." They include several course outlines.

Milton D. McLean. Religious Studies in Public Universities. This study was unavailable to me but is reportedly a valuable resource.

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